**Greta Gerwig’s Paradise Lost**

In an interview for BBC Radio’s *Front Row*, Greta Gerwig remarked that the sources of *Barbie* include medieval and Renaissance poetry. She went on to talk about John Milton’s late Renaissance epic *Paradise Lost:*

I remember the first time when I read Milton and I realized this idea of, Paradise has no poetry. Because what do you need metaphor for if everything is literally what it is? You need this sort of separation from your environment in order to have a need for the beauty of poetry.

This might be a result of my monomaniacal obsession with Milton, as I finish writing a book about his poem’s afterlives across the modern age, but I was struck by the deep parallels between *Paradise Lost* and *Barbie*.

Since its publication in 1667, readers have often used *Paradise Lost* to think critically about patriarchy. Mary Shelley took the epigraph of *Frankenstein* from Milton, and one of the three books that her monster reads is *Paradise Lost.*George Eliot called Milton “my demi-God,” and the central relationship in *Middlemarch*comes about because the spirited young Dorothea fantasizes that Casaubon might be an unrecognized Milton rather than a desiccated old pedant. Virginia Woolf called *Paradise Lost*the “essence of which almost all other poetry is the dilution,” but in *A Room with a View,* the hyper-learned Milton is an inhibiting figure, someone women are not permitted to rival (even as Woolf strove to do just that and probably succeeded). That Gerwig is thinking about Milton’s radical retelling of the Book of Genesis should come as no surprise. In an interview for *Vogue*, she pointed out that Barbie dolls are “the opposite of the creation myth in Genesis”: Eve was created after Adam, to be his companion, but Ken was made for Barbie. If this film offers a new Book of Genesis, its echoes of *Paradise Lost*help to explain this shiny new myth.

Barbieland, like Eden, is sumptuous, sweet, and sufficient in every sense. The *New Yorker* critic who complained that *Barbie*’s color palettemade him feel he was being “waterboarded with Pepto Bismol” should read *Paradise Lost* only after consulting his doctor. Milton’s Paradise is a place of never-cloying sweetness. He doesn’t use the word “pink” (first used to describe the color in 1669), but the word “rose” appears 32 times, and the poetry is saturated with luxurious description.

Like Milton’s Eden, Barbieland also contains the seeds of its own destruction: gender inequality. Ken exists in a state of perpetual anxiety, hoping only to please Barbie. In this, he resembles Milton’s Adam*.*When Eve is born, she falls in love with her own reflection in a pool of water. On first seeing Adam, she is unimpressed. Adam worries about her self-sufficiency and complains about his desire for her. Milton is said to have invented the word “self-esteem,” and that is exactly what Adam lacks. Fear of living without Eve compels him to eat the fruit. Both Ken and Adam suffer from patriarchal rage. When Barbie and Ken travel to the real world, the sight of Los Angeles leads Ken to recognize his own frustrations. He returns to Barbieland to establish the patriarchy there, and it falls to the Barbies to restore order.

The ending of the film is another place where I suspect Milton’s influence. In the final 25 lines of *Paradise Lost*—for my money, among the best lines of English poetry—Adam and Eve leave Eden and go out into the world as the Garden is destroyed behind them. They have been prepared for this experience by the archangel Raphael, who drops a magic ointment into Adam’s eye, giving him a vision of the future of the world and, beyond it, Heaven. The fallen world that Adam and Eve are entering is still a divine creation. We are meant to imagine they are not unhappy.

Barbie experiences something remarkably similar. Her creator gives her a montage of human life: mothers holding babies, old people smiling, people touching grass. It is this image of happy dependency that causes her to choose the real world over Barbieland. Like Adam, who weeps at his vision, a tear now rolls down Barbie’s cheek, an incontinence not permitted to the plastic doll. As in *Paradise Lost*, this ending involves a certain political realism, implying that the real world is better than the most perfect fantasy. But something about it feels abrupt, unconvincing. In this, again, *Barbie* is like *Paradise Lost:* critics have complained that the final two books (or chapters)—containing the angel’s education of Adam—lack drama.

Hoping to understand the film better, I went to see it a second time, and a writer I respect was sitting in the row in front of me. As far as I could see, neither she nor her companion cracked a smile once. Afterwards, she told me the film was “peak liberal feminism.” The numerous jokes about Barbieland’s all-female Supreme Court make this seem incontestable, and a slew of articles have argued that the film’s progressive politics are frustrated by its complicity with capitalism. Its extensive publicity campaign, with its long list of brand partnerships, seems proof of this. But neither the film’s political message nor its marketing are an adequate explanation of its widespread appeal. Social media has made us sophisticated interpreters of the politics of culture, but that doesn’t mean politics is culture’s goal. Here we might learn something from the afterlife of *Paradise Lost.*

In the four centuries since its publication, most people haven’t read Milton’s poemfor its theological argument, but instead for the stirring speeches of the revolutionary Satan and the voyeuristic descriptions of Eden. In the late 18th century, the poet William Blake made the famous claim that Milton wrote “in shackles” when he wrote of God, but with perfect freedom when he described Satan, because the poet “was of the devils party without knowing it.” Readers including Mary Wollstonecraft, Carl Jung, and Malcolm X raided the epic for materials, taking it to places far beyond the poet’s original imaginings. *Paradise Lost*became a classic example of “reading against the grain”: taking an authoritative work of culture and, like a doll, making it speak its own criticisms.

Could viewers do the same with *Barbie?*We don’t have to enjoy it for its politics but instead for what happens along the way. The visual jokes, costumes, sets, songs, and dance ensembles are not just ornament but places where a different kind of thinking happens. My favorite moment in *Paradise Lost*comes when Eve returns to Adam, having eaten the forbidden fruit. Adam has been preparing a flower garland for her hair, but when he hears what he has done, “From his slack hand the garland wreathed for Eve / Down dropped, and all the faded roses shed.” The moment is both moving and cartoonish, and something similar happens in *Barbie*.

Near the beginning of the film, Ken injures himself trying to run into the sea. When Barbie comforts him, Ken wilts into the nape of her neck. This gesture is meant to look pathetic, and Ryan Gosling plays it cartoonishly, but something about it was strangely moving. In her 2002 book *Hollywood Flatlands,*Esther Leslie describes how Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno found something redemptive in Hollywood cartoons. For the two critical theorists, a drooping Disney rose conjured fantasies of a reconciliation between humanity and nature, something impossible in a capitalist world. Weirdly, this is what Gerwig sees in *Paradise Lost:*poetry as a measure of our alienation from nature and each other. I think this is why Ken’s gesture is more moving than the sentimental montage at the end: it’s an image in negative of a world where dependency is not cause for contempt. What is most cartoonish in this film might be most true.

It seems a mistake not to allow ourselves to enjoy somethingbecause we disagree with its message. The capacity to take the world as it is given to us and make something radically new out of it is an early meaning of the word “plastic,” which emerged in the English language in the 17th century. This capacity was fundamental to Renaissance humanism, the philosophy on which Milton was raised. The scholar Ernst Cassirer characterized humanism as the belief that “man is not simply the creation of a force beyond himself, but that he has to, and can, create himself.” Renaissance humanists claimed this radically creative capacity for “mankind,” and Gerwig—like others before her—has reclaimed it for women. Likewise, future viewers might make of this film something far more plastic than a doll.